



Experiences without for-me-ness? Reconsidering alleged counter examples from psychopathology and psychedelics

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**Psychopathology and Philosophy
in Relation to the Existence of Human Being
Part II**

*Edited by
John Cutting & Guido Cusinato*



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MADS GRAM HENRIKSEN & JOSEF PARNAS

EXPERIENCES WITHOUT FOR-ME-NESS? RECONSIDERING ALLEGED COUNTER EXAMPLES FROM PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND PSYCHEDELICS

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1. Introduction

In contemporary philosophical discussions of consciousness, a central question concerns whether for-me-ness (or the “minimal self”¹) is a necessary feature of phenomenal consciousness. Over the years, Dan Zahavi has defended a position of “experiential minimalism”, arguing that phenomenal consciousness necessarily entails reflexive self-consciousness in the sense that there is something it is like for me to have or live through experiences, thus considering “for-me-ness” a universal feature of phenomenal consciousness [Zahavi 1999; 2005; 2014; Zahavi & Kriegel 2016]. Several authors have challenged this position by offering counter examples, i.e. by presenting examples of experiences, which, on their interpretation, lack for-me-ness [e.g., Metzinger 2003; Lane 2012; 2015; Billon 2013; Millière 2017].

The purpose of this article is to explore if such examples of experiences really can be said to lack for-me-ness and thereby constitute viable counter evidence, disproving the universality of for-me-ness. First, we introduce the concept of for-me-ness. Then, we present and discuss examples of experiences from the domains of psychopathology and psychedelics that sometimes are claimed to lack for-me-ness.

¹ In this article, we use the concepts of “minimal self” and “for-me-ness” interchangeably and synonymously [cf. Zahavi 2014; 2018].

2. *Selfhood and for-me-ness*

In a famous passage from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume describes how he tried to discover his own self through acts of introspection. Yet, the self was nowhere to be found, «I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception» [2007, 165]. Unable to find what he was searching for, Hume denied the existence of the self, «I am certain there is no such principle in me» [*ibid.*]. When reading this classic passage, one may be tempted to place Hume in a “no-self camp”, opposing it to a “self camp” where its members assert the existence of the self. However, such contradistinctions can easily be deceptive. Let us for example say that we want to use Hume’s “no-self” argument to challenge the phenomenological claim of the existence of the minimal self. Sooner or later, however, we would face difficulties, realizing that phenomenologists too deny that the self can appear as an object of experience that we can direct our attention towards. According to them, there is no “self-object”, populating consciousness. Eventually, we would have to draw a conclusion that would call into question the viability of our own analysis – the self, whose existence Hume denies, is *not* the same self as that which phenomenologists claim to exist. In other words, Hume and the phenomenologists operate with different concepts of the self. What Hume is arguing is that there is no “substantial” self in the sense of an unchanging, foundational entity that underlies the ever-changing flow of “perceptions”, which, on his account, consist of “impressions” and “ideas” [Hume 2007, 7]. Differently put, the self is not a “*subiectum*” in the metaphysical sense of the term. Phenomenologists agree; the self is not some “thing”, e.g., a hypothetical substrate or synthesizing principle, above or beneath the experiential stream. By contrast, what phenomenologists describe with the notion of minimal self (or for-me-ness) is a very specific feature of experiential life, namely that all experiences manifest first-personally to the subject of experience. Notably, Hume’s introspective search for his own self and his realization of the self-illusion were not experientially given to someone else but to himself in his own first-person perspective. In this regard, Hume’s denial of the existence of something like a substantial self has no bearings for the phenomenological claim of the existence of the minimal self – in fact, Hume’s introspective search presupposes the existence of the minimal self.

Although phenomenologists argue that the minimal self cannot appear as an object, they do not consider it absent, unconscious or as some sort of pervasive “I-qualia”. Rather, they claim that the minimal self manifests itself pre-reflectively as a certain configuration of experience. For example, when I read a book, listen to a melody or taste an orange, I am implicitly (i.e. pre-reflectively) aware that I am the one who reads, listens or tastes. I do not need to reflect upon “who” it might be that is reading, listening or tasting in order to know that it is me. In other words, I am self-aware, not only when I introspect or reflect upon myself, but also simply in virtue of having experiences. Thus, it is not self-reflection that brings about self-awareness. Rather, as already Sartre pointed out, «it is a non-reflective consciousness which renders the reflection possible» [2003, 9].

Now, the claim, rigorously defended in several seminal publications, is that phenomenal consciousness entails pre-reflective self-consciousness in the sense that there is something it is like *for me* to have or live through experiences [Zahavi 1999; 2005; 2014]. As Zahavi and Kriegel [2016] put it, phenomenal consciousness entails a “what-it-is-like-for-me-ness”. Here, “for-me-ness” articulates that experiences are first-personally manifest, i.e. they are always given to the subject of experience in a manner in which they are not given to anyone else. For example, the pain I experience is given to me in a manner that is fundamentally different from how you may experience my pain. Similarly, your experience of pain manifests to you in a way that is distinctly different from how I may experience your pain. The difference is precisely that one’s own experiences are first-personally present, i.e. there is an epistemic asymmetry at work here. Zahavi’s proposal has been to identify this ubiquitous, first-personal or subjective character of experience with *for-me-ness* (or the minimal self), and he has argued that *for-me-ness* is a necessary feature of phenomenal consciousness.

3. Alleged counter examples of for-me-ness

The standard way to challenge universality claims is to come up with suitable counter examples. This strategy has also been applied in discussions on *for-me-ness*. Many authors have presented examples of ex-

periences, which they claim lack for-me-ness, thereby seemingly rebutting the claim that for-me-ness is a necessary and universal feature of phenomenal consciousness. Some of these examples are found in psychopathology and altered states of consciousness during psychedelic intoxication.

Probably the most widely used example to challenge the universality of for-me-ness is thought insertion. Briefly put, thought insertion is a phenomenon in which patients experience some of their thoughts as not belonging to themselves, thereby ascribing the source of these thoughts to someone or something else. The delusional misattribution of certain thoughts to someone or something else may be vague or concrete, i.e. patients may experience alien thoughts in their own mind without knowing where these thoughts come from or they may believe that specific others or forces are the source of these thoughts [Henriksen *et al.*, in press]. In discussions of self-consciousness, the phenomenon of thought insertion has attracted attention, because it seems to imply that mere awareness of one's thoughts is not enough to secure recognition of these thoughts as one's own.² Many authors have argued that we must distinguish between different forms of experiential ownership, typically dividing it into a "sense of agency" and a "sense of ownership". Sense of agency refers to a sense of being the initiator of, say, a thought or bodily movement, whereas sense of ownership refers to a sense of being the one who experiences, say, a thought or movement. Despite important differences in their accounts, many authors have argued that the sense of agency is lost but the sense of ownership retained in episodes of thought insertion [see, e.g., Stephens & Graham 1994; Gallagher 2004]. Since the sense of ownership is considered preserved on these accounts, the universality of for-me-ness is here not at stake.

Other authors, however, have offered more radical accounts of thought insertion that do in fact draw the universality of for-me-ness into question. Already in *Being No One*, Metzinger argued that patients experiencing thought insertion lack both the sense of agency and ownership [Metzinger 2003, 445]. Since the sense of ownership or the "phenomenal quality of mineness", as he also calls it, is ab-

² For a critical discussion of the use of thought insertion in philosophy of psychiatry, see Henriksen, Parnas, and Zahavi [in press].

sent in thought insertion, ownership cannot be a necessary feature of phenomenal consciousness [Metzinger 2003, 334]. Later, Lane [2012; 2015] made similar claims, arguing that thought insertion and other psychopathological phenomena constitute counter examples of for-me-ness. Additionally, Billon has also argued that thought insertion results from a disorder of ownership rather than agency [Billon 2013, 310]. If these accounts of thought insertion are correct, then they demonstrate the fallaciousness of the claim that phenomenal consciousness necessarily entails for-me-ness.

Lane [2012] has also discussed another counter example of for-me-ness that come from the domain of psychopathology. Ordinarily, he claims, self and consciousness seem «tightly interwoven», but some psychopathological cases enable us to see that ownership is in fact attributed to mental states on the basis of a «second step» in which the subject infers that he or she is the subject of that particular state [Lane 2012, 281, 257]. To substantiate his claim about this «second step», Lane refers to a case study by Zahn, Talazko, and Ebert [2008]. They report a story of a patient (D.P.), who after an incident on a long-distance flight, where he experienced an attack of tachycardia and dyspnoea accompanied by the fear of asphyxiation, complained of «double visions». An examination revealed that D.P. did not see doubled objects in a literal sense. He described that he saw everything normally, yet his perception of objects had somehow changed in the sense that «he did not immediately recognize that he was the one who perceives and that he needed a *second step* to become aware that he himself was the one who perceives the object» [Zahn *et al.* 2008, 398; italics added]. This pertained to perception of objects and not to perception of his own body or actions. A psychopathological examination found no other symptoms and a structured interview for DSM-IV-TR found that «the clinical picture did not fit to any specific psychiatric diagnosis» [*ibid.*, 399]. D.P. was diagnosed with cognitive disorder NOS [*ibid.*]. Medical examination demonstrated abnormal functioning (hypometabolism) in inferior temporal, parieto-occipital, and precentral brain regions. Despite not finding other psychopathological symptoms, treatment was initiated with different types of antidepressants and antipsychotics, as well as with memantine and recompression therapy in hyperbaric chamber (D.P. had been diving 10

days before the incidence on the plane). All treatment initiatives proved ineffective. According to Lane, D.P.'s need for a «second step» to make an inference from a perceived object to himself as the perceiver of that object is «sufficient to serve as a counter example to SS – perspective does not determine mineness» [Lane 2012, 258].³ On Lane's account, first-personal givenness of experience does not secure for-me-ness, and he concludes: «Phenomenal consciousness does not entail self-awareness; it is not stamped with a meish quality; and, for-me-ness does not play a determining role in its constitution» [*ibid.*, 281].

Let us finally address another challenge to the universality of for-me-ness. This one comes from recent research in psychedelics – a research domain that has experienced a resurgence of scientific interest in the last decades [e.g., Carhart-Harris *et al.* 2014; 2016; Nichols 2016]. Following psychedelic intake, a manifold of altered states of consciousness has been described, including experiences of ego-dissolution, fusion with the surroundings or even of unity with the universe, unreality, and of being detached from one's own mental processes or body. According to Millière [2017], psychoactive substances such as mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD can induce experiences of ego dissolution that disrupt both narrative and minimal aspects of selfhood.⁴ Though he suggests that more research is needed to settle this issue, he states, «the available data is consistent with the idea that the “sense of self” lost during DIED is not (or not merely) the narrative self, but the minimal self-awareness of ordinary experience rooted in sensorimotor processes» [Millière 2017, 11].⁵ To substantiate his claim, Millière draws attention to subjective reports of ego dissolution, arguing that «drug users are often reluctant to use the first-person pronoun at all when describing DIED» [Millière 2017, 14]. One drug user, which Millière quotes in this context, states: «There existed no one, not even me ... so would it be proper to still speak of “I”, even as the notion of “I” seemed so palpa-

³ Lane uses “SS” as an abbreviation for “self-specificity” theories of consciousness to which group he includes experiential minimalism.

⁴ For a discussion of the distinction between minimal and narrative selfhood and the distinction's applicability to psychopathological research, see Parnas & Henriksen [2019].

⁵ Millière uses the abbreviation “DIED” for “drug-induced ego dissolution”.

bly illusory?» [*ibid.*]. Contrary to episodes of thought insertion, where Millière claims that «it still makes sense to say that *I* am aware of this thought, and indeed that *I* am aware of it as alien», the subjective reports of ego dissolution indicate, on his interpretation, that «they lack this first-personal aspect altogether» [*ibid.*, 15]. In the end, Millière suggests that for-me-ness may be implicitly operative in ordinary conscious experience but it seems to break down in experiences of drug-induced ego dissolution. If this is the case, then experiences of ego dissolution also pose a challenge to the claim that for-me-ness is a necessary, irreducible feature of phenomenal consciousness.

4. *Reconsidering these counter examples*

How to best address these alleged counter examples? One initial reply to the claim by Metzinger, Lane, and Billon that episodes of thought insertion lack ownership or for-me-ness is to insist that patients with thought insertion experience that certain alien thoughts appear in their *own* stream of consciousness and not in somebody else's stream of consciousness [e.g., Zahavi 2014, 39f.]. This is why the experience is so disturbing. By contrast, alien thoughts in alien minds are usually harmless [Zahavi 2005, 144]. Differently put, episodes of thought insertion are still given first-personally to the experiencer, i.e. some sense of ownership or for-me-ness is retained even in these psychopathological experiences. If this was not the case, i.e. if the sense of ownership or for-me-ness had effaced entirely, the experience of thought insertion could simply not articulate itself.

So why do Metzinger, Lane, and Billon insist that episodes of thought insertion lack ownership or for-me-ness? Without going into the details of their individual accounts, a part of the answer seems to be that they all embrace a *literal reading* of patients' descriptions of their experiences. Billon claims that «patient's reports should be taken at face value» [2013, 299] and he formulates what he calls a «phenomenological constraint» that theories of thought insertion must adhere to: «If the patient says that an occurrent thought is not his, then it is not subjective. If the patient says that an occurrent thought feels his, then it is subjective» [*ibid.*]. According to Billon, patients with thought insertion do not state

that the alien thoughts in some way are their own («They explicitly deny this!» [2013, 301]) and thus, following the phenomenological constraint, he concludes that episodes of thought insertion are not subjective and lack ownership. Although Lane offers a different account of thought insertion, he seems to accept the legitimacy of the claim that patients' reports should be taken at face value, when he states that his own account also fulfils this constraint [2015, 116]. Finally, Metzinger argued that philosophical theories of mind should be able to incorporate the «existence denial», which patients with Cotard's Syndrome may exhibit,⁶ considering it an «important phenomenological constraint» [2003, 455]. Here, Metzinger too advocates a literal reading of patients' reports and he even claims that these patients «truthfully» describe their experience of being dead or somehow nonexistent [2003, 456ff.]. In their effort to take the patients' descriptions of their experiences seriously, the authors mistakenly take this to involve taking their descriptions *literally*.

So, why is a literal understanding of patients' reports of psychopathological phenomena problematic? First, mental terms are polysemic and what a patient means with a given term does not necessarily correspond to these terms' specific clinical meaning. Patients may report being "depressed" but when asked to clarify what they mean with the term or when prompted to provide examples of their experiences of being depressed, it may become evident that the experiences in question have nothing to do with clinical meaning of depression. For example, a patient may report longstanding feelings of being depressed. When asked to elaborate, he describes that he constantly struggles to understand why human beings behave the way they do: why do they say "hello" to each other when they meet, why do they shake hands, why do they shake the right hand, etc. All the time, he ponders such basic questions, and this reflective burden exhausts him and leaves him fatigued [cf. Parnas & Henriksen 2014, 254]. Here, the patient's experiences may be indicative of psychopathological phenomena such as problems with common sense and hyper-reflection; the experiences are not, however, suggestive of depression. Thus, clinicians cannot take patients' reports at face value. By contrast, sincerely listening to patients and taking their

⁶ Patients with Cotard's Syndrome may report that they are dead, do not exist or have no internal organs [Berrios & Luque 1995].

experiences seriously requires faithful exploration of the patients' experiences, their structure and quality, in the *context* of the patients' other experiences, behaviour, and life history. This also applies to philosophy of psychiatry. We cannot assume that what a patient meant with a specific statement in specific quote (e.g., that some thoughts are not his own) necessarily corresponds to a loss of certain features of phenomenal consciousness as they are defined in the philosophical literature (e.g., for-me-ness, ownership or agency).

With regard to the example of D.P., who experienced «double visions» in the sense of not immediately being able to recognize himself as the perceiver of objects, we suggest that this example too does not suggest something like an absence of for-me-ness. Rather, the example testifies precisely to the presence of for-me-ness. D.P.'s experience of not immediately being able to recognize himself as the perceiver of objects is still first-personally manifest to him. In fact, this experience is so distressing that he seeks medical help. Instead of lacking for-me-ness, it seems that for-me-ness here is disturbed in the sense that it does not automatically or unproblematically lead to reflective self-ascription of this particular kind of perceptual experience. This interpretation seems to be in line with the one suggested in the original study, where the authors concluded that the case of D.P. demonstrates «selective changes in the quality of the sense of self-ownership for perceptions of objects» [Zahn *et al.* 2008, 401]. In other words, the authors concluded that the sense of ownership or minimal self was affected or impaired but not completely lost in this patient.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that Lane operates with different concepts of for-me-ness, mineness, and ownership than the authors he is criticizing (e.g., Zahavi). This is evident, when he argues that it is important not to conflate «hosting» a thought with «owning» a thought, and that «hosting» does not imply «ownership» [Lane 2012, 260] or when he states that «perspective does not determine mineness» [Lane 2012, 258]. Here, Albahari's distinction between different kinds of ownership might be helpful. In her book *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self*, she makes a distinction between “possessive ownership”, “personal ownership”, and “perspectival ownership” [Albahari 2006, 53-54]. “Possessive ownership” concerns objects that are mine by social

conventions (e.g., the books in my bag); “personal ownership” is a matter to being thematically aware of oneself as the owner of an experience; and “perspectival ownership” refers to experiences being given to the subject of experience in a distinctive manner. While D.P. perhaps could be said to experience problems in the domain of “personal ownership” when perceiving objects, there is nothing to suggest that these problems also affects “perspectival ownership”. By contrast, D.P.’s experience of not immediately being able to recognize himself as the perceiver of objects is still given to him first-personally, i.e. in a manner that is different from how this experience can appear to anybody else. In other words, the epistemic asymmetry is here preserved and for-me-ness, as we have defined it, is not absent.

Finally, Millière’s claim that drug-induced altered states of consciousness indicate a loss of minimal self-awareness can be refuted on similar grounds. Despite the remarkable character of these experience, they remain conscious, memorable, to some extent describable, and, most importantly in this particular context, characterized by for-me-ness. They are first-personally manifest to the subject of experience and not to anybody else. Experiences of drug-induced ego-dissolution are to some degree reminiscent of certain mystical experiences [e.g., Stace 1960] such as the oceanic feeling and the experience of undifferentiated unity (*unio mystica*) with the Absolute (e.g., God, emptiness [*sunyata*] or the universe). In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, we find the following illuminating description of such an experience: «as a lump of salt thrown into water melts away ... even so, O Maitreyi, the individual soul, dissolved, is the Eternal – pure consciousness, infinite, transcendent» [quoted in Stace 1960, 118]. The experience of the dissolution of the individual, finite self into infinitude is the very heart of the experience of *unio mystica* across mystical traditions [*ibid.*]. However, even these experiences remain characterized by their first-personal givenness, i.e. they also appear to the subject of experience in a way that they do not for anybody else [Zahavi 2011]. In cases of *unio mystica*, we have elsewhere argued that the minimal self is not lost but affected in a specific way [Parnas & Henriksen 2016]. We have also argued that the minimal self is neither intact nor lacking but disturbed in cases of thought insertion [Henriksen *et al.*, in press].

Finally, with regard to Millière’s reference to drug users’ tendency to avoid the first-person pronoun when describing their experiences of ego dissolution, let us just add that patients with schizophrenia also sometimes may be tempted to avoid the first-person pronoun and instead use third-person pronouns, e.g., “one is” or “it thinks” [Minkowski 1927]. However, avoidance of the first-person pronoun or use of third-person pronouns are not evidence of a lost for-me-ness.

5. Conclusion

We have presented an account of for-me-ness, discussed alleged counter examples, and refuted them all. Thus, we maintain that for-me-ness is a necessary, ineliminable feature of phenomenal consciousness. Using Albahari’s distinction, we can say that perspectival ownership cannot be disowned or, in other words, that for-me-ness cannot lack, but it can be affected [e.g., Parnas & Henriksen 2016; Henriksen *et al.*, in press]. In our view, much of the contemporary debate between advocates of for-me-ness and their opponents rests on how the concept of for-me-ness is defined by the authors using it. Unsurprisingly, different definitions lead to different conclusions about the status and role of for-me-ness in theories of phenomenal consciousness. Crucially, one cannot conclude from the fact that certain authors have used for-me-ness in their own specific way and presented examples of experiences, which apparently lack the kind of for-me-ness that they describe, that the universality of for-me-ness, as we, following Zahavi, define it, has been invalidated. The introductory reference to Hume and the brief discussion of whether or not his “no-self” claim could challenge the phenomenological claim of the existence of the minimal self was meant to illustrate this particular problem in the current scientific debate.

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Minimal Self; For-me-ness; Schizophrenia; Thought Insertion; Psychedelics; Consciousness

Abstract

In contemporary consciousness studies, a central question concerns the nature of the most primitive and fundamental features of phenomenal consciousness. Some authors (e.g., Zahavi) have argued that for-me-ness (or minimal selfhood) is a fundamental and necessary feature of phenomenal consciousness. The concept of for-me-ness articulates that experiences are first-personally manifest, i.e. they are always given to the subject of experience in a way in which they are not given to anybody else. Several authors have challenged this claim by presenting what they take to be counter examples, i.e. experiences, which, in their view, lack for-me-ness, thereby seemingly rebutting the claim that for-me-ness is a necessary feature of phenomenal consciousness. In this study, (i) we present the account of for-me-ness, (ii) present three alleged counter examples that come from the domains of psychopathology and psychedelics, and (iii) critically discuss these examples and eventually refute them all. Thus, we maintain that for-me-ness is a necessary, ineliminable feature of phenomenal consciousness.

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